

**STUDY OF THE IMPACTS OF  
SCHOOL SAFETY LEGISLATION**  
conducted for  
**The Governor's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee**

by  
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**SUMMARY OF RESULTS - 1998 SURVEY OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS**

The 1997 Washington State Legislature took action related to ensuring school safety in E2SHB 1841, a bill that seeks to improve knowledge about safety risks posed by individual students as well as to increase the capacity for schools and teachers to address these risks and related problems. The Governor's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee (GJJAC) is responsible for studying the impacts of this legislation, and contracted with Praxis Research to conduct the study.

In late October 1998, a questionnaire was sent to each Superintendent of Washington State's 296 school districts. The questionnaire sought information about the perceived extent of the problems of safety and security in the district's schools, the legislation's effects and contributions to school safety, and any difficulties in implementation. A copy of the survey questions and overall responses is attached.

**Characteristics of Responding school Districts:**

A total of 148 completed surveys were returned for a response rate of 50%. There was at least one school district responding from all of the state's 39 counties, and the distribution of returns was fairly evenly divided between districts located in the eastern and western portions of the state – 47% and 53% respectively. A complete listing of all districts with an identification of those who responded is appended as well.

Respondents included both very small, rural, districts serving only elementary-aged students as well as suburban and urban comprehensive districts on both sides of the state, including several of the state's largest school districts. A majority of the responses came from districts with fewer than 1,000 students – this is similar to the distribution of all districts in the state, and suggests that the responses are broadly representative of the state's schools overall. Urban districts in the Puget Sound area, including the state's largest district –Seattle - were poorly represented in the returns, and this may affect the representativeness of responses for this sub-group. To compensate for this, key survey questions were analyzed according to student enrollment, and as expected, there were some significant differences relating to number of students and district size.

- 32% of the responses came from districts with “very small” enrollments of 368 or fewer students; 20% came from districts classed as “small,” with enrollment of 401 to 1009 students; 18% of the responses were from “medium” sized districts, with 1200 to 2555 students; 19% from “medium-large” districts, enrolling 2698 to 9021 students; and 10% from “large” districts, with 10,388 to 32,751 students.

### **Significant School Safety Problems:**

The first survey question listed school safety concerns from the legislation and asked respondents to identify which of these were felt to be significant problems in the schools in their district. The smaller school districts tended to identify all these less frequently than medium or large ones.

- 70% of the respondents selected “disruptive behavior in the classroom” as a significant problem. This was the most likely problem selected by all districts, and was picked by a majority across all size categories. Respondents from the smallest schools were least likely to identify this as an issue (53%) while the largest districts were most likely to do so (80%).
- Other significant problems identified were selected less frequently, with 41% noting “harassment of students and school staff,” 38% “use of drugs and alcohol on campus,” and 37% “violence or threats directed at other students and school staff.” As above, smaller schools were least likely to select these problems, with drug/alcohol problems (including sales, selected by 21%) disproportionately likely to be issues for the largest districts.
- Respondents identified several other behavioral problems that were noted as issues in other areas of the questionnaire as well. Most of these concerned one of the following: 1) problems responding to disruptive behaviors by special education students; 2) truancy and attendance; and 3) negative or disrespectful attitudes among students and parents.
- Asked to write in which of these behaviors was considered to be the single most significant disciplinary problem, most respondents described disruptive behaviors in the classroom and on campus, followed by harassment or violence towards students and staff.

### **School Policies:**

The second group of questions in the survey dealt with district policies and an assessment of their effectiveness.

- All responding districts (100%) reported that their current policies allowed classroom teachers to take corrective disciplinary action towards students who disrupt normal classroom activities and 97% reported that policies allow for the long-term suspension or expulsion of a student who repeatedly disrupts classes. Districts were less likely to have policies limiting student possession of pagers and/or portable or cellular telephones, although a majority (59%) reported these as well.
- These district policies had, with few exceptions, been the subject of recent review and revision or such a review was in process. A majority (56%) had last reviewed their discipline policies in the 1997-98 school year, 9% in 1996-97, and 26% planned such a review in the current school year. Just 9% had not reviewed discipline policies in the past two years.
- 60% of the respondents definitely felt that their district’s present policies adequately address issues related to school safety, 37% felt that this was somewhat true, and a scant 3% felt school safety issues were not adequately covered by their policies. Districts expressing a more moderate level of satisfaction were disproportionately those who had not yet or not recently revised their discipline policies

### **Implementation and Response:**

A related set of questions asked about the implementation of these policies and other procedures relating to school safety, specifically singling out elements called for in E2SHB 1841.

- Districts were most likely to be in compliance with the requirements for the school principal to provide information about student convictions in adult court or diversion or adjudication in

juvenile court to the student's teachers and other school personnel. 56% of the districts responded that this information sharing occurred in their schools regularly or routinely, 29% that it occurred but not so regularly, and 15% that this happened rarely or never. The larger the school district, the more likely this communication was to occur and to be a routine matter.

- Districts reported a more mixed pattern of responsiveness to the legislation requirements for the courts or law enforcement to notify the school principal when a student is convicted. 42% answered that this occurred regularly or routinely, 29% that this was not done regularly, and 30% that it happened never or rarely. The smallest school districts were disproportionately likely to report not being notified, with small to mid-size districts most likely to report regular communication from the courts.
- Districts were least likely to receive information about a transferring student's previous involvement in violence or criminal behaviors from the student's former school. Just 24% reported that this happened regularly or routinely, 42% that information was received but not as a matter of course, and 35% that it was received rarely or never. There were no consistent differences by district size in responses to this question.
- A majority of the districts (50%) provide students who are suspended or expelled two or more alternatives for keeping studies current. 76% provide homework and self-study materials, with this being the only option for about one-third of the districts; 50% offer an alternative educational program; 27% a structured support program for home study; and 29% assistance with high school completion for older youth.
- Respondents felt that this and other recent legislative actions had not had a substantial impact on the number of student suspensions and expulsions in their schools over the past one to three years, with 63% feeling these had stayed about the same, 23% that they had increased, usually slightly, and 16% that they had decreased, also mostly slightly.

### **Disciplinary Actions:**

Respondents also were asked to provide specific information about disciplinary actions taken in each school district. Collection of such data is called for in the legislation. There is, however, no standardized format for compiling these data, or specification of the details expected other than for weapons violations, nor is there any required reporting of this additional information. The questionnaire included a format to use to report these data, modeled after the information sought by GJJAC. Districts were requested to provide as much of the requested information as was available, and many aggregated these data for the first time to respond to this survey. Respondents had the alternative of using other formats that better fit their data collection efforts, and there were a variety of forms used for survey responses. All information was analyzed insofar as possible according to the format provided in the questionnaire.

- Some 29% of the respondents did not provide any data for this section of the questionnaire, with the greatest percentage of responses received on actions taken at the district level, and not differentiating between middle school/junior high and high school-aged students. Most actions (72%) involved males. Involvement of racial and ethnic minorities varied with school location and student characteristics.
- There was enormous variation in the number of disciplinary actions reported by the districts. Much of this difference was a function of school size, with the number of incidents consistently related to the number of students enrolled in district schools. The table below gives survey responses on disciplinary actions sub-divided according to student enrollment.

<b>DISCIPLINARY ACTIONS FOR 1997-98 SCHOOL YEAR</b> <b>DISTRICT TOTALS BY STUDENT ENROLLMENT</b>										
<b>District Size/ Student Enrollment</b>	<i>Smallest</i> 378 or less (33%)		<i>Small</i> 401-1009 (19%)		<i>Medium</i> 1200-2555 (18%)		<i>Med/Large</i> 2698-9021 (19%)		<i>Large</i> 10,388-32751 (11%)	
<b>Disciplinary Actions</b>	Mean	Med.	Mean	Med.	Mean	Med.	Mean	Med.	Mean	Med.
Referrals for Alcohol Violations	1.6	-0-	2.7	1.0	6.3	3.0	13.4	14.5	33.0	22.5
Referrals for Drug Violations (not tobacco)	1.3	-0-	2.7	2.0	11.5	10.0	30.3	30.0	68.8	39.0
Referrals for Classroom Disruption	48.4	19.0	161	65.5	392.4	311.0	619.2	359.5	1301	991
Referrals for Fighting	5.9	3.0	16	10	60.8	56	113.7	109	395.5	280
Referrals for Threats/ Harassment	6.3	2.0	7.2	4.0	47.3	40	65.1	42	147.2	98.5
Referrals for Vandalism	2.1	-0-	4.1	2.0	13.9	11	18.8	16.5	47.1	29
# of Detentions	70.1	28.5	327.3	98	642.6	447	940.3	700.5	1543	1632
# of Short-Term Suspensions	18.3	4.0	45	39	200.7	147	497.4	417.5	1839	1296
# of Long-Term Suspensions	1.7	-0-	4.4	2.0	11.5	9.5	38.1	31.5	149.7	111
# of Expulsions	.55	-0-	1.2	-0-	3.7	2.0	23.5	10.5	67.7	55

- All respondents, regardless of school size, reported the greatest number of disciplinary actions occurring for classroom disruptions. This finding is consistent with their answers to the survey's first question about the significance of various disciplinary problems. Disciplinary actions were least likely for alcohol violations, and in smaller districts, this also was true for drug violations. Medium and large districts were more likely to report higher numbers of disciplinary actions for drug violations, although these still remained proportionately fewer than for most other types of discipline issues.
- The size of the districts also affected the types of sanctions used for these disciplinary infractions. Detention was the most likely response across all districts, but the likely use of short-term suspension increased disproportionately with student enrollment. A number of respondents noted that incidents of this type were rare in their small schools, were often dealt with informally, and students seldom needed to be suspended or expelled. Also, some of these smallest districts did not serve students of high school age. With higher student enrollments, and older students, school districts become much more likely to encounter a number of disciplinary problems. Still, even given this greater likelihood of problem, larger school districts also seem more inclined than smaller ones to take formal action involving suspension and even expulsion from school in response.

### **Difficulties Implementing Legislation:**

Survey respondents had two extended opportunities to comment on the legislation and its impacts on the schools in their district, both of which yielded some similar issues. The first of these requests for elaboration specifically asked for an account of any difficulties encountered or anticipated in implementing the legislation and its several requirements.

- 75% of the respondents answered the question asking for information about problems with implementation, with about one-third of these indicating they had encountered or expected no difficulties. Of the two-thirds who did note some problems, several cited concerns about confidentiality, others again brought up the difficulties dealing with special education students, and a number expressed frustration with “unfunded mandates” by the Legislature. The latter concern involved costs for tracking and monitoring discipline problems as well as expenses associated with obtaining and managing information from other schools and the courts. Several respondents summed this problem up as “time and resources.”
- The most significant external barriers identified in these comments involved the difficulties of tracking and exchanging information between separate systems – including both other schools and the juvenile justice system. Wrote one “It is very difficult for various agencies to communicate as a routine when the student is generally transient in nature. Tracking between systems is very difficult.” Another was more categorical: “Information from previous schools and/or juvenile courts or other agencies is incomplete or non-existent.”
- Several respondents cited difficulties getting information from previous schools, indicating that obtaining disciplinary data often required a specific request and the investment of staff time. It may be, as one respondent pointed out, that ‘some schools still are not aware that they must share this information.’
- Communication with the courts system also presented problems for numerous respondents, as in the following comment: “Courts do not provide the information – and there is nothing the school district can do about it.” Another respondent noted that “Timely notification is a problem. A student may be in detention and the school will not be notified immediately.” The difference between the schools and the courts as distinctive systems was an implicit issue in the identification of many of these problems, summed up by this respondent: “The courts and law enforcement are not in practice or procedure to work and communicate with schools.”

### **Comments and Suggestions:**

The second and final request for comments came at the conclusion of the survey and was a general request for expanding on experiences of the districts in trying to improve the safety and security of students and staff. Nearly 60% of the respondents took advantage of this chance to expand on their questionnaire responses, with many writing at length about the problems the legislation was attempting to address. Several respondents used this space to iterate the positive steps in policies and activities they feel their schools are taking to resolve these problems.

- Many of the comments expressed appreciation for these legislative actions, citing them as helping “legitimize the district’s position.” “Legislative action put teeth in our handbook,” wrote one respondent, an effect characterized by another as giving schools “the buck stops here” support. The following comment describes the actions as “helpful because they focus attention on the problem. The focus helps schools recognize the need to have strong appropriate policies to deal with student discipline.” Other respondents cited their value in raising the public’s awareness; still others in dealing with parents.

- These appreciative comments were often accompanied by critiques about the costs and difficulties associated with effective implementation. “Providing the clout to act when needed was long overdue,” concludes this respondent, adding, “the ‘red tape’ of paperwork creates a hardship.” This respondent effectively summarizes this view: “legislation that helps to create/maintain safe schools is always helpful, especially when needed resources accompany legislation. Additional dollars to fund alternate programs for suspended and expelled students would improve school climate and reduce violence.”
- About half the respondents offered some specific ways in which additional funding, as above, would improve school safety and security. These took two forms. First and most often, districts called for additional resources for general as well as several specific prevention and intervention programs and services. These suggestions included calls for more counselors and staff support positions, increases in drug/alcohol intervention and anger management and conflict resolution training, and more access to community and family programs for all students. The need for alternative education programs and difficulties with the Becca bill underscored several of these suggestions. “We need more dollars for alternative education and stronger mandates from the legislature,” wrote one such respondent.
- The second focus of suggestions for improvements in school safety involved increased security services, most often use of a school resource or security officer – often a uniformed law enforcement officer from the local jurisdiction. A number of respondents had received funding from either the state or a federal program for such an officer and cited this as particularly beneficial.
- Many of these and other respondents expressed the view that the provision of adequate security on campuses should be part of regular funding, and not the result of a competitive grants process as it is currently. Wrote one district respondent: “Hired a security person. Very helpful! There should be a state funding formula that addresses safety as part of basic education.” Another pointed out the “need for per capita funding for campus security and violence reduction programs.” This following respondent made a similar call for regular rather than grants-based funding, concluding that “I feel with the concern nationally regarding safety – it should be a #1 focus of our legislators and congress. Schools should be the safest places our students can be.”
- A number of respondents added comments that repeated or underscored several of the responses they and others gave in the previous questions. For small school districts, there was further confirmation that many are not always touched by the school safety issues that affect larger districts and which prompted the legislation. When they are affected, however, one respondent pointed out that smaller districts are at a particular disadvantage in meeting legislative requirements without additional funding.
- Other respondents continued to identify difficulties enforcing discipline policies with special education students, dealing with Becca bill requirements and truancy, and being asked to provide information and tracking without additional resources. The perspective expressed by this respondent was shared by many: “Concern in our district is not so much safety and security as it is disruption of the educational process. Legislation is generally unhelpful and increases bureaucratic use of time. It is important that local districts have authority to hold students accountable.”